To be two: Racing and e/racing myself as a non-Aboriginal woman and mother to Aboriginal children

Introduction

If I use the word "story", what does it mean to you as a reader? Perhaps like me, the word story takes you back to a place in your childhood where everything was lived through your imagination. For some of you, the word story might easily be replaced with others such as fairytale, fable, fiction or it might even take on a more cynical twist to mean a fanciful retelling of facts. Story is a kind of remembering and Franz Fanon might mischievously suggest that stories are revolutionary which should "properly be called a literature of combat" (1967, p. 193) for they evoke dangerous truths about a nation's history and identity. If Hannah Arendt were here she might say that "storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it" (1968, p. 105) and Virginia Woolf would insist stories are essential for us to begin moving from the "cotton wool of daily life" to "moments of being" (1976, p. 72). Storytelling is one of the primary methods of writing in critical race research, and in this paper, I would like to take up Patricia Hill Collins' (2004, p. 45) call for a critical racialised theorizing of motherhood in feminist thought to consider what it means to be a non-Aboriginal mother to Aboriginal children. I take an autoethnographic approach to ask questions about discourses of whiteness at play in my everyday experiences of mothering and how my white race power and privilege manifests as motherwork with my children. I share the lingering uncertainties I hold about essentialist categories of race by asking whether being a non-Aboriginal woman makes me a "good enough" mother to my Aboriginal children and by exploring the ways in which my understandings of motherhood have shifted across the "colour line" (Dalmage, 2000). Is it possible as Irigaray (2000) asserts "to be two" in this context, and what kinds of racing and e/racing of self and m/other take place?

Writing to be two

I turn the key in the lock and open the door to my office. A familiar smell of books, paper, and yesterday's coffee wrars around and welcomes me. As I sit down at my computer, I feel ready to write. In this paper I want to tell a story about race, whiteness and mothering as told through the "doubleness" of my experience as a white mother to Aboriginal children but I hesitate, unsure of how to start such a "personalised whiteness writing" (Brewster, 2009, p. 129; c.f. Brewster, 2004; Nicoll, 2000; Westcott, 2007). This is not going to be an easy story to tell — talking, reading and thinking about race is not comfortable business, particularly not for white people like me, and this is a story about the "emotional work of being white" (Frankenburg, 1996, p. 14). I know immediately that I am going to have to tread carefully, for it is not only race talk which makes people nervous — academic writing which experiments

and plays around with language, power, authority, emotion, reflexivity, subjectivity, representation, genre, creativity and performance has a similar effect. I smile, heartened by Laurel Richardson's assertion that anyone who thinks the "creative and analytic are contradictory and incompatible", is a dinosaur waiting to be hit by a meteor (Richardson, in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962). Carolyn Ellis soon joins my internal conversation and announces that in her opinion, "There is nothing more theoretical or analytical than a good story" and immediately draws attention to the doubleness inherent within this kind of academic research and writing. While *ethnography* may be thought of as a way of thinking about and being in the cultural world as an involved participant (Ellis, 2004, p. 26), *autoethnography* refers to "writing about the personal and its relationship to culture" (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). An autoethnographer gazes back and forth, first by looking outwards with a wide ethnographic lens at the "social and cultural aspects of their personal experiences; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis, 2004, p. 37).

While the self is always already present in any writing that we do as social scientists, the explicit intention behind autoethnographic work is to "reveal and re-unite the personal with the physical, emotional, mental, relational, social, cultural and dimensions" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix) of experience. Richardson believes that such writing brings into play a feminist approach in that it "touches us where we live, in our bodies" (2000, p. 931) and puts theory "to work in everyday life, in the immediacy and temporalities of the body, the living tissue of social relations: desires, sensations, convictions, doubts, puzzlements, curiosities, anxieties, hopes" (2000, pp. 928-929). There is a doubleness in autoethnographic work, and indeed, to engage in autoethnography as Holman Jones (2005, p. 764) suggests, is to be two — to perform a delicate balancing act between self and culture, flux and movement, story and context, fiction and fact, art and science, and writer and reader. A scene is set, a story told, intricate connections are woven, experience and theory are evoked and then ruthlessly let go (Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765). All of the balls that have been juggled fly into the air and both performer and audience stand waiting with bated breath to see how they might fall.

It is the performative aspect of autoethnography as personalised whiteness writing which I am keen to explore, a writing style which could easily be described as "ficto-criticism" because it entails a "necessary self-consciousness" and responds to an ethical imperative to make "visible what is necessarily effaced in the [process] of writing the academic essay" (Brewster, 1996, p. 92). Will the writing take the form of a short story, poetry, fiction, novel, photographic or visual essay, script, personal essay, journal, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose (Ellis, 2004, p. 38), or perhaps all of these things at once? In that moment of wondering, I begin to type — not really sure of what this story is

going to look like, but knowing that in telling it I want to be able to take you as the reader there with me — into the scene of experience, feeling the feelings, living through the conflicts and race/ing yourself in the process.

The bathroom

The story begins in the here and now with a woman standing in the toilets of a conference centre. She has just given an academic paper presentation on her work as a non-Indigenous woman teaching Indigenous Australian studies at university level. The paper spoke to the issue of appropriate pedagogy for teaching in this disciplinary area, her personal and professional positioning as a white woman married to an Aboriginal man and mother to their two sons and what this means for her as an educator, and her deep desire to use her white race power and privilege to work towards social justice for her Indigenous Australian people — for her family — as an ethical and moral imperative in all that she does. The response to her paper sends her reeling. The woman stumbles into the bathroom and barely makes it to the basin. Flashes of hot and cold perform an awkward rhythm alongside her desperate gasps for air. Her head feels light and stars begin to float around her, dangerously clouding her vision. She holds onto the porcelain bowl to steady herself. The woman tries to calm herself. She almost begins to feel herself once more, and lifts her head to look in the mirror. She stands and stares at her reflection. The woman has seen the face looking back at her before but she sees more clearly than ever that she is white. It doesn't matter which way she turns in the light, her face remains the same. The woman's heart sinks to the floor and finds relief on the cold hard tiles. Her head begins to spin again as the words from the Aboriginal woman in the audience ring loudly in her ears, "You don't count, as a white woman you don't count, not for your Aboriginal children, and not for what you do as an educator. You don't count because you will always be a white mother. You have no place in either — not in our black education and not in our black families". The woman cannot stand to listen anymore and in a gesture of erasure, she reaches to wipe her whiteness away.

The woman goes on a trip

It is some time before the woman can face herself and the world again. The comment from the audience after her paper had rocked her to the core and she felt a desperate need to retrace her steps to find out how on earth it was that she got to that position in the first place. She decided to take a trip down memory lane. She boards the train in the year 1992 and with each click clack on the tracks, she watches the years unfold.

She sat down in a university classroom. She sat down in front of a black woman and a black man. She sat down to listen and to learn from them. She sat down next to the Aboriginal man who would become her husband.

She saw the straight and seemingly endless Carpentaria Highway stretching out in front of her. She saw a sign that said 398 kilometres to go to Borroloola. She saw herself driving down the same road almost twenty years ago. She saw a young naive girl whom she hardly recognises.

She heard the steady lull of big wheels on black bitumen. She heard a chorus of Yanyuwa, Garrwa, Mara and Kudanji voices join the gentle hum. She heard them calling her. She heard singing drawing her to a place she has come to call home.

She went as an ethnomusicologist, trying to catch songs of the Others. She went with her husband's maternal grandmother and her mother-in-law. She went knowing that his Nana was stolen from Borroloola because she was a "half-caste". She went hearing the tears of grief as she was told the traumatic story of forcible removal from country, culture and family.

She wanted in the beginning to fill the gap in the musicological record. She wanted to record and preserve, to document and understand. She wanted all of these things for herself and her research. She wanted more of the Others and less of herself.

She took with her the tools of her trade. She took with her a notebook, camera and tape recorder. She took with her, her stark white skin. She took with her power and privilege that she had not yet thought to question.

She was called Mijiji, white woman. She was called Nungarrima, the "right way" skin name from the Rrumburriya clan. She was called a Yakibijirna, a bush name linking her to the country of her husband's great grandmother and the Tiger Shark Dreaming. She was called Kundiyarra, a partner in song.

She smiles as she anticipates the warmth of the women who will wrap their arms around her when she arrives. She smiles as she sees them singing and dancing around fires at night. She smiles as familiar feelings of belonging, friendship and love embrace her. She smiles because she knows that for a time she can almost forget she is white.

She frowns knowing that other people think differently of her. She frowns knowing that her white skin changes everything. She frowns remembering the harsh words that said she doesn't count. She frowns knowing that she is starting to drown in her confusion and sorrow.

She wonders, does any of this matter? She wonders, if her career as an ethnomusicologist working with Aboriginal people actually means a damn? She wonders, how she thinks that her experiences as an ethnomusicologist have anything to do with herself as a mother? She wonders how she ever thought they did.

She asks again, who am I then? She asks again, do I count? She asks again, what does being married to an Aboriginal man mean to who I am? She asks again, who and how should I be as an Aboriginal man's wife and mother to his children? She asks again, does my whiteness make me a good enough mother?

The woman sways from one idea to another

Being an academic, the woman resorts to the tried and true method for answering her questions — by researching what others have to say about mothering and motherwork across racial borders. With a coffee in hand, she makes space for herself in a corner of the library and begins to read. The first book she picks up recalls Fraser's words of advice to Australian women, who reminded in 1900 that "if [a woman] is the worthy, prospective wife and mother to whom these pages are dedicated ... [she] is not likely to mate herself with a member of a lower race" (in Ellinghaus, 2006, p. 150). Even though Fraser was writing over 100 hundred years ago, the woman knows from her own experience the thinly veiled warning hidden in these words — white middle class girls do not marry Aboriginal men. Not now, not then. To do so is to threaten the status quo and the white race power and privilege from which she comes (c.f., Ellinghaus, 2006, p. 151). The woman quickly writes this quote in her notebook, all the while remembering the whispers behind closed doors she has heard when she wasn't meant to about her husband and their choice to marry. "He'll never be any good; did you see him with a beer in his hand the other night? He's only just come back from the bush, who knows when he'll go walkabout next?" "Does she know that their children might be coloured? What if there's a throwback to black? It really would be better for everyone if their children were white." "Maybe it's because we have her that black Betsy doll to play with. Do you remember? She used to only ever want to play with that one".

The woman turns to the work of Ruth Frankenburg (1993) and her telling of white women's stories in interracial marriages to forget the racist undertones in these words and find some measure of solace. Although this text was written almost two decades ago, the woman knows the truth of Frankenburg's words from her own contemporary experience. Frankenburg (1993, p. 104) writes that white women in interracial marriages risk and often experience rejection by their families who may position their choice to marry across the colour line as a "left-wing" and radical act. Such disowning attempts to resolve the "impossibility of a white/non-white connection" and further seeks to reject the "unwhitening" of the white family member. Yes, the woman thinks to herself, it is about rejection and refusal, but it is also about erasure — a convenient side-stepping and "sweep it under the carpet" style denial of her husband and children's Indigeneity which effectively wipes away the sins of her transgressive marriage. She can hear white voices whispering in the back of her mind, teasing, taunting and terrorising. "Race traitor", they say. "We hate you", they say. "We hate you 'because you're not one of us and you should be'

(Fallon, 2007, p. 41)", they say. "You forgot the golden rule", they say. "Go and out and play as much as you may but stay in your own backyard" (Fallon, 2007, p. 92), they say. "We hate you, traitor, we hate you".

The woman closes the book. She can feel tears welling in her eyes and tries to read the new page open in front of her. Words associated with the interlinked colonial, assimilationist, reproductive, and nurturing role of white women are everywhere in books about Aboriginal history and relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Cole, Haskins and Paisley speak about "the white woman" as an important figure in the civilising mission of empire — "while white men had conquered the 'frontier', they would need 'properly' domesticated white women to remake themselves as settlers (2005, p. xxv). Certainly, white women were expected to play a humanising role and some deployed their maternalistic position as "Great White Mothers" to simultaneously speak as activists and reformers for their less fortunate black sisters and decry them as "unsuitable mothers". The woman finds it hard to see herself as this kind of "great white mother" — the subjectivities activist or reformer do not roll easily from her tongue. But there's one more. Her whiteness marks her as colonial and she knows that her baggage includes acts of dispossession, theft, murder, and rape by members of her race; a contemporary reality of racism, inequality, and disadvantage enacted by her people upon the original owners of this land; and, she carries an unpaid debt for over 200 years of injustice. When she decided to jump the fence and marry an Aboriginal man, did she bring all of these things in her bags too? Did she carefully conceal these items in her over-nighter when she gave birth to her two boys? And are they tucked in the depths of her handbag when she walks into her boys' school to talk to the principal about an acknowledgement of country at the beginning of each year's assembly?

The woman is confused. She is not sure what to do with her colonial baggage in her role as a mother to Aboriginal children. Her husband's Nana, who was stolen from her family at Borroloola, always reminded the woman to put her youngest child out in the sun. The woman's little boy's skin is the fairest of the two and Nana was always worried that he was too light. Every time the woman visited her, Nana would ask, "When was the last time you let him outside to play around? Put some oil on his skin to brown him up. We don't want anyone thinking he's white you know". The woman took no offence; she knew that Nana was worried that her great grandson might be stolen by the white authorities too for being light skinned. The woman knew that Nana was gently telling her to never forget that her great-grandchildren belong to her, to Yanyuwa people and the saltwater country of the Sir Edward Pellew Islands. The woman's husband often jokes to their children that if they don't behave, welfare might come around and take them. The woman laughs every time she hears this but she also feels a deep but

unspoken colonial shame and promises to be the best "non-white" white mother she can be. But does that mean she should be more like an Aboriginal mother or more like herself?

The woman has never "researched" Aboriginal women as mothers. Why would she? It seems like a very impersonal and intrusive thing to do. It would not feel right. The irony of her "other" research work is not lost on the woman but she brushes it aside — for now. Her relationship with Aboriginal mothers has always been a social one, something she has understood by being with women and their babies. Her Yanyuwa *kundiyarra* (name erased, 2000, 2005) are women who, according to the Yanyuwa kinship system, are her "most necessary companions". Her *kundiyarra* are her teachers, her guardian angels with broad shoulders and they have always been careful to tell the woman how to be a mother to her Yanyuwa boys — never how to be a white mother, or how to be a black mother, but simply how to be a mother. The woman miscarried her first baby and her husband's mother and maternal grandmothers comforted her by sharing stories of childbirth, telling Dreaming stories about spirit children, and singing songs to soothe babies. These things they told the woman are for your own babies when they come. Her *kundiyarra* knew she was carrying her second baby before the woman did. They rang her from Borroloola to say that someone had dreamt about a long haired male spirit child walking along a sandy white beach twirling fire sticks. The sandy white beach was a place called Li-Wirndirndirla — the woman's husband's country. The spirit child could only belong to one person. The woman carried this baby full term and her son was given the bush name of the fire-twirling spirit child in the dream. This is his Dreaming, her *kundiyarra* told her. Tell him this story when he goes to sleep. Tap his knees as you sing him the Spirit man's song to help him grow up to be a strong, respectful and good man. Cover or blow into his ears when you see a shooting star because that's a dangerous Dreaming and tell him never to dig holes in the ground during the wet season because the Rainbow Serpent is just waiting to swallow small boys like him. The woman quietly hums a Yanyuwa song she used to sing to her boys when they were babies:

> Ngarna Yanyuwa mirningiya, (*You are a Yanyuwa man*),
> ngarna Yanyuwa mirningiya (*You are a Yanyuwa man*),
> ngarna Yanyuwa (*You are Yanyuwa*),
> jibiya wali-angku (*You belong to this country),*
> ngarna Yanyuwa (*You are Yanyuwa*).

The woman stops singing suddenly and remembers. There is one aspect of her identity as a mother to Aboriginal children which she has not explored yet — how she relates to her children in their multiplicity as white/black children. They are her children too. How does she relate to them in their shared whiteness? The woman realises that she rarely stops to think about her children as white. She

always already positions them as Aboriginal, knowing that their whiteness is privileged and reinforced by the culture in which they live. Her children are expected to behave and act white, and because whiteness is part of their social worlds, they can play this part very well. The woman sees her mothering work as an opportunity to share with her sons the things that she never knew about the power and privilege her whiteness brings until she looked at herself in the mirror. She wants her boys to understand the colonial baggage her family brings to their identities — that her mother's family were brought here as convicts for stealing sheep, her father's family were settlers from Scotland who bought land in southern New South Wales, and that both sides of her family remain quiet about any interactions with Aboriginal people. But, the woman is worried that one day her boys will be angry about their white ancestors, the racist ideals they represent, and the kinds of atrocities inflicted upon their Aboriginal family by white people like their mother. She is scared that one day her boys will reject her, not because she is their mother, but because she is white. The woman is terrified that her mother's love will not be enough when race becomes a dividing line between them.

To be two

The woman does not like to think about these things and prefers to remember when she was pregnant — when her body carried and nurtured her sons' lives into being. She and her children were one within two. They began life in relation to her as their mother — not as two completely separate subjects but as two in relation with one another. She and they were two. A white mother, two white/black babies and in one body the difference between them in perfect harmony. This, the woman muses, might come close to what Luce Irigaray (2000) means when she uses the evocative phrase "to be two". Irigaray is referring to the almost always privileging of relationships between two by women and her writing often draws upon the physical, original and maternal nature of intersubjectivity. But this is not what interests the woman. While she is not sure of her philosophical interpretation of this feminist thinker, the woman is intrigued by the way Irigaray explains the relation between two in relation to existence and experience. "I am born in/of a family, in a determinate period of History," writes Irigaray, "in a precise place and within the context of a tradition. But I have encountered and crossed other causalities" (2000, pp. 56-57). The woman understands Irigaray to be saying that my being and that of an Other exist together in a space of in-betweenness, the in-betweenness that is the encounter and the experience of self and Other in relation. For the woman, the in-betweenness is the space she occupies as a white woman and mother to Aboriginal children and from Irigaray she realises that in this in-betweenness she can be two. She loves the poetics of Irigaray's writing and languishes awhile in the beauty of her writing. "To be two", Irigaray continues, "means to help [the one and the] other to be, to discover and cultivate happiness, to take care of the difference between us" (2000, p. 58). The woman's breath catches sharply in her throat — her

role as a white mother to Aboriginal children has always already been about nurturing the difference between us. Her lips softly mouth the final words in Irigaray's text, "To protect both you and me, to remain two, I must learn love ... I contemplate the outside and the inside. I think without renouncing you, me, us. I love to you, I love in me" (2000, p. 118).

In conclusion: Back to the bathroom

The woman leaves the library and walks quickly back to the bathroom. Her heart and mind are buzzing with the sentiments of Irigaray's words. She feels a renewed sense of confidence as she steps in front of the mirror to look once more at the white face which mothers Aboriginal children. The woman stands perfectly still and looks. The woman keeps on looking, not certain what she is hoping to see, but with a sense that she must keep on looking until she finds it. Eventually the woman sees the person in the mirror — and she is me. I am the woman in the mirror and the mother in this story. The white face that stares back at me is mine. It has always been and it is only now that my tale has been told that I feel brave enough to make my whiteness truly visible. Can you understand how desperately I needed to conceal myself from you so that this story could be told? My experience of doubleness, in-betweenness and being in me and in two is filled to overflowing with raw emotion — the undreamed fulfilment and love I feel as a mother to my blue-eyed Aboriginal boys, the deep shame and guilt which comes hand in hand with my subjectivity as a white woman and recipient of the spoils of colonialism, the knowledge I carry that my choice to marry and have children with an Aboriginal man is a transgression that my white race will never forgive, and the hope I hold for a humanity which dares to hold difference with love in their hands and their hearts. I have found this paper difficult to write and present because the truth is that mothering across the colour line hurts. It hurts because the reality of being two is not easy — one difference or other usually suffers some kind of erasure. But mostly it hurts because I know that my subjectivity as a white mother to Aboriginal children represents a disruption to white race power and privilege that mainstream society in Australia is not ready to accept. Yes, even still today. My husband's Aboriginal family — my Aboriginal family — have already made room in their understanding of relationships across the colour line for me. No matter how hard I try, I cannot help it — I am an idealist at heart — and my maternal hope is that while I may not experience understanding as a white mother to Aboriginal children in my life time, my two boys will know what it means "to be two", to live and love in this world, and be accepted as my white/black children.

References

Arendt, H. (1968). *Men in dark times*. Orlando, FLA: Harcourt.

Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Brewster, A. (1996). Fictocriticism: Pedagogy and practice. In C. Guerin, P. Butters & A. Nettelback (Eds.), *Crossing lines: Formations of Australian culture* (pp. 89-92). Adelaide, SA: Association for the Study of Australian Literature.

Brewster, A. (2004). Revisiting the idea of home. In J. Muk-muk Burke & M. Langford (Eds.), *Ngara: Living in this place now. Poems, essays and meditations* (pp. 71-75). Wollongong, NSW: Five Islands Press.

Brewster, A. (2009). Beachcombing: A fossicker's guide to whiteness and indigenous sovereignty. In R. Dean & H. Smith (Eds.), *Practice—led research, research—led practice in the creative arts* (pp. 126-152). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University.

Cole, A., Haskins, V., & Paisley, F. (2005). Preface. In A. Cole, V. Haskins & F. Paisley (Eds.), *Uncommon ground: White women in Aboriginal history*. Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press.

Collins, P. H. (1994). Shifting the center: Race, class, and feminist theorizing about motherhood. In E. N. Glenn, G. Chang & L. R. Forcey (Eds.), *Mothering: Ideology, experience, and agency* (pp. 45-65). London: Routledge.

Dalmage, H. M. (2000). *Tripping on the color line: Black-white multiracial families in a racially divided world*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ellinghaus, K. (2006). *Taking assimilation to heart: Marriages of white women and Indigenous men in the United States and Australia, 1887-1937*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, MA: Alta Mira Press.

Fallon, K. M. (2007). *Pay dirt*. Perth, WA: University of Western Australia Press.

Fanon, F. (1967). *The wretched of the earth*. Sydney, NSW: Penguin Books.

Frankenburg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. London: Routledge.

Frankenburg, R. (1996). When we are capable of stopping we begin to see: Being white, seeing whiteness. In B. Thompson & S. Tyagi (Eds.), *Names we call home: Autobiographies on racial identity* (pp. 3-17). New York, NY: Routledge.

Holman Jones, S. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 763-791).

Irigaray, L. (2000). *To be two* (Trans. M. M. Rhodes & M. F. Cocito-Monoc). London: The Athlone Press.

Nicoll, F. (2000). Indigenous sovereignty and the violence of perspective: A white woman's coming out story. *Australian Feminist Studies, 15*(33), 369-86.

Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 923-948). London: Sage.

Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 959-978). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Westcott, R. (2007). Witnessing whiteness: Articulating race and the "politics of style". In D. W. Riggs (Ed.), *Taking up the challenge: Critical race and whiteness studies in a postcolonising nation* (pp. 287-306). Adelaide, SA: Crawford House.

Woolf, V. (1976). *Moments of being: Unpublished autobiographical writings* (J. Schulkind, ed.). Orlando, FLA: Harcourt.